DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 374 928 RC 019 765

AUTHOR Danaher, P. A.; And Others
TITLE The Role of Course Development and Design in an Itinerant Schooling Program: The Perceptions of Staff Members of the School of Distance Education in Brisbane, Queensland.
INSTITUTION University of Central Queensland (Australia). Faculty of Education.
PUB DATE May 94
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Joint Annual Conference of the International Council for Distance Education and the Annual Conference of the Distance Education Association of New Zealand (10th, Wellington, New Zealand, May 8-12, 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Correspondence Study; Disadvantaged; Distance Education; Educational Needs; Elementary Education; Foreign Countries; *Itinerant Teachers; Life Style; Migrant Children; *Migrant Education; Migrants; *Program Effectiveness; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Showmens Guild (Australasia)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the perceptions of teachers associated with the Brisbane School of Distance Education (Queensland, Australia), concerning their role in the establishment and implementation of a primary education program for children of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia. Interviews with five itinerant teachers revealed that their responsibilities include assessing correspondence papers from students and maintaining telephone contact with students, home tutors, and parents, as well as working in selected towns on a short-term basis to teach "face-to-face" lessons to itinerant students. Each teacher worked with between 15 and 20 children, usually in family groups across grade levels. Teachers expressed concerns about the show children's lifestyle and how this has affected their educational and social development. However, all teachers felt that the distance education program had improved the children's educational opportunities and adequately addressed their educational needs. Disadvantages of the children's itinerant lifestyle that the program was unable to address were lack of routine, lack of continuity, dependence on the support of the home tutor, role conflicts of local teachers, and insufficient program funding. Implications for other itinerant education projects include recognizing the importance of teacher attitudes when implementing an educational program for a marginalized group. Contains 20 references. (LP)

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ED 374 928

The Role of Course Development and Design in an Itinerant Schooling Program: The Perceptions of Staff Members of the School of Distance Education in Brisbane, Queensland

P. A. Danaher
Lecturer in Open and Distance Learning

D. W. Wyer
Lecturer in Educational Psychology

L. O. Rowan
Senior Research Officer in Education

P. M. Hallinan
Senior Lecturer in Educational Psychology

Faculty of Education
Central Queensland University
Rockhampton 4702
Queensland
Australia

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Paper presented at the joint annual conference of the International Council for Distance Education and 10th annual conference of the Distance Education Association of New Zealand, Wellington Town Hall, Wellington, New Zealand, 8-12 May 1994.

RC 019765

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Abstract

In accounts of educational innovations directed at the particular needs of 'marginalised groups', much attention is rightly focussed on the aspirations and responses of members of the targeted groups. Researchers also analyse the policy documents underlying the establishment of the programs designed to increase access by these people to pedagogical services available to inhabitants of 'the mainstream'.

This paper follows - and assumes the benefit of - an alternative approach, in which explicit interest is given to the perceptions and concerns of the personnel charged with implementing specialised programs. It is asserted that a vital, but sometimes underplayed, determinant of the effectiveness or otherwise of such programs is the role of these personnel, and in particular the extent to which they feel empathy with the expectations of members of the targeted groups and ownership of the processes set up to meet those expectations.

The paper presents a detailed examination of the part played by staff members of the School of Distance Education in Brisbane, Queensland, in establishing and implementing an innovative program of itinerant primary schooling for the children of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia on the northern coastal 'run' or circuit. Several interview transcripts are interrogated with a view to determining the teachers' knowledge of and empathy with the lifestyles of show children, as well as their individual assessments of the efficacy of the program. The paper concludes by elaborating the implications of this vital intermediary role for other specialised educational projects.

The Role of Course Development and Design in an Itinerant Schooling Program: The Perceptions of Staff Members of the School of Distance Education in Brisbane, Queensland[1]

Introduction

> Where would I like to work? I'd like to stay in distance education, but I think - I mean the job I've got now is wonderful. I really enjoy it, but obviously you can't travel around forever.
>
> ...I suppose it's been to the program's benefit that they've allowed me to become part of it, and I know lots of things about the [show] families...[but] I don't gossip about what happens over there. So that's good and they know that. That's helped, definitely, in me being able to explain why different things work, and why we need to do this at a certain town, or why swimming was important. You know, things like that, because the parents have identified that need, so this program has to react to that.

These statements were made in June 1993 by two different teachers from the Brisbane School of Distance Education involved in the itinerant schooling program set up in 1989 for children on the Queensland coastal circuit of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia. The statements encapsulate many of the differing and sometimes conflicting experiences and expectations held

[1]The writers acknowledge gratefully the willing assistance of the teachers whose perceptions are represented here. Interviews were transcribed by Mr Geoffrey Danaher and Ms Pam Gale. This paper is one of several written by members of the Professional Growth Research and Teaching Group in the Faculty of Education at Central Queensland University; copies can be obtained by application to the senior author. The research was funded by a Central Queensland University Research Grant (**ER/U/399**), awarded through the Research Centre for Open and Distance Learning. The writers accept responsibility for the views expressed in the paper.

by the itinerant teachers of their role, the lifestyles of their students, and the effectiveness of the program with whose implementation they are charged.

Related literature

Surprisingly little of the literature on itinerant students focuses on the role of teachers who have face to face contact with them. Bina's (1987) study of rural special education itinerant service delivery contained the reflection that itinerant teachers need to be able to adjust easily to change, to modify their expectations of their charges, and to exercise a sense of humour. A UNESCO report of a meeting of specialists on itinerant schooling (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation, 1989) identified "The teachers" as one "keypoint" to which "necessary conditions for an effective and relevant schooling of the different categories of nomadic children" needed to be related (p. 19). The suggested areas of future research under this "keypoint" centred around the following questions:

- What about teachers belonging to the nomadic populations?
- What knowledge do teachers have about the nomadic life?
- Are there language problems? Solutions?
- Is there any provision for a special training for teachers of nomadic children?
- What about the children/teacher issue?
- Is there a need for measures with regard to the encouragement of teachers? (p. 23)

The specialists made two specific and unexceptionable recommendations about itinerant teachers:

- Teachers must be knowledgeable in the culture of nomadic peoples and curricula contents. Preference should be given to nomads in the recruitment of teachers.
- Teachers should be guaranteed initial training, in-service training, tenure, prospects, motivation, and special incentives. (p. 26)

Within the more extensive field of studies of distance education, a corresponding lack of interest has been devoted to the on-site deliverers of educational programs designed and developed elsewhere. Sewart (1993) attributed the perceived neglect of research into student support systems in distance education to the "almost infinite variation" that such systems

exhibit (p. 3), and also to the industrialised paradigm of teaching and learning that continues to dominate this mode of education and that Sewart and others have sought to challenge. In the view of 'student support services as service industry' advocated by Sewart, the personnel who provide these services - "the interface between the [distance education] institution and its students" (p. 11) - and the means by which they enact their role are not readily transferable from one country to another. Instead, student support services:

- must be constructed in the context of the almost infinite needs of the clients;
- are dependent on the educational ethos of the region and the institution;
- are dependent on the dispersal of the student body, elements of resource, and the curriculum or product of the course production subsystem;
- are dependent on the generic differences in the student body which it has been set up to serve. (p. 11)

Twelve years earlier, Sewart (1981) had expressed a similar viewpoint, by distinguishing between the "subject matter" and the "advice/support" components of distance teaching (p. 10), and by asserting that, far from causing 'distance education' to become a contradiction in terms, the provision of student support services actually played a vital role in ensuring the success of distance education as a learning mode. Pursuing this theme, a recent review of research in distance education suggested that the intermediary's role "has been consistently cited as critical to the effectiveness of a distance education program" (Threlkeld & Brzoska, 1994, p. 55).

> Because the on-site facilitators play such a vital role, their importance or contributions should not be diminished in any way. A successful distance education program must be sensitive to the needs of the facilitators and offer support on a continual basis. (p. 56)

As an illustration of these ideas, Dodds (1992) and Robertson (1992) have shown how the intermediary role operates at the New Zealand Correspondence School. Dodds differentiated among the intermediary's roles as home tutor, supervisor, and coordinator, and he elaborated several implications for policy and practice in a distance education institution relying heavily on these different kinds of facilitators. Robertson argued that delivering material through an intermediary has a number of advantages: it "has wide applicability for assisting education[al] development in countries where the general level of literacy is low or where the preferred learning style involves group rather than individual study" (p. 4), and it helps also to attain

"flexibility and individualisation[, which] are two of the greatest strengths of distance education" (p. 11).

The remainder of this review elaborates one important dimension of the intermediary's role in distance education: the engagement in dialogue. Evans and Nation (1989) argued that, through the theory of dialogue, distance education theory may be connected to the broader theories of education and the social sciences. Dialogue is a horizontal relationship founded upon the principles of love, humility, and faith (Freire, 1972). Such a relationship, built upon these three principles, will lead to mutual trust and a close relationship in what Freire termed "naming the world". Moreover a dialogical relationship implies the fluidity to enable both the teacher and the students to propose educational themes outside the predetermined ones. These themes are hinged, according to Freire, and are present when the meaningful dialogical relationship is present. Hinged themes have the capacity to develop the relationship between the program and the "view of the world held by the people" (Freire, 1972, p. 92). It is this view of the world, when included in the educational program, that allows students to be the masters of their own education, for they are enabled to discuss issues that are of relevance to them - being from their world. This is when education is a true partnership, when it is built upon an open dialogue.

However, Modra (1991) challenged the notion of the horizontal partnership in the distance teaching mode. She asserted that dialogue in the Freirean sense implies that the students are teachers and the teachers are students, as it is in this way that the teacher and the students may join as equally knowing subjects to engage in that dialogue. In a discussion with Stephen Kemmis and Lindsay Fitzclarence, she developed the argument that for learning to occur the teacher should bring to the dialogue a wider body of content knowledge than the student. However, because there is a community of education present, the student may be reactive as well as proactive and the teacher also will be proactive as well as reactive. This implies that the educational partnership is more complex and dynamic than that proposed by Freire.

By being underpinned by the theory of dialogue, distance education can be seen to move from a behaviourist theoretical base favoured by the educational technologists to a cognitive theoretical base more relevant to educational practitioners. Here the cognitive theorists are rejecting the psychological concept of 'information processing' as being too simplistic a view of learning, instead insisting that learning occurs in the social world (Gee, 1992). Concepts such as 'agency' as developed by Giddens can offer a fuller understanding of dialogue. Dialogue, when linked to 'agency', is based upon the notion of power. Power, Giddens (1989) argues, is

one of several primary concepts that are clustered around the relations of structure and action. Because of this, power can be found in all human action, as power is the means of doing and of action. Power, then, is seen in relation to access to resources. Power is fourfold (Law, 1991): it is 'power to', 'power over', 'power storage', and 'power discretion' (p. 165). Law argued that all four aspects of power are legitimate, and that power to and power over may, in fact, be stored and used at the discretion of the actor. All individuals, according to Giddens and Turner (1987), are powerful, but those with a larger share of physical and intellectual resources are capable of greater power.

Meighan (1984, p. 167) argued that the authoritarian view of political power "proposes a central point for decision making at the top of the pyramid". Such a proposition denies the networking of power in certain systems, and the existence of checks and balances in those networks. He saw that the myth that only qualified teachers can educate perpetuates the notion of parental powerlessness. Such a myth denies the legitimate role of the parent in the education of the child, and also denies that learning cannot occur outside the classroom that is managed by a trained teacher. This is evident in the case of the children of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia, where considerable education does, in fact, occur within the business setting.

Most of the literature theorising on distance education and distance learning is concerned with tertiary distance education and learning. Holmberg, who is regarded by many (Evans, 1990; Evans & King, 1991; Keegan, 1990; Parer, 1992) as the most significant theorist in the field of distance education, conceived the focus of all education as individual learning and the associated processes as important only to the extent that they support that individual learning. He presented the concept of the "guided didactic conversation", through which the student has dialogue with the supporting agency, in this case the School of Distance Education, and he advocated a range of techniques such as invitations to debate and colloquial language as the means of encouraging that dialogue.

Distance learning, as defined by Holmberg (1989), "covers the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or at the same premises but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance, and teaching of a supporting organisation" (p. 3). As is implied in this definition, the main research emphasis of much of the literature on distance learning is tertiary learning, not primary or secondary learning. However, the key concepts of the lack of continuous, immediate supervision apply equally to primary home schooling, and so to the

children of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia.

According to Holmberg (1989), certain hypotheses may be generated from the study of distance learning. Of the ten hypotheses that Holmberg proposed, five would seem to apply to primary and secondary distance learning. These are the propositions that:

- intrinsic motivation is a crucial condition for learning;
- learning is promoted by the student fitting subject matter into existing cognitive structures;
- warmth in human relationships, bearing on the study situation, is conducive to emotional development;
- feelings of rapport with tutors, counsellors, and the supporting organisation generally strengthen and support study motivation as well as promote study pleasure;
- learning is encouraged by frequent communication with fellow humans interested in the study. (p. 162)

This brief review has shown that the comparatively limited literature on the role of the face to face teacher working with itinerant and distance students suggests that this role is vital to program implementation, and that it should inform issues of course design and development. The extent of the intermediary teacher's contact with and understanding of these students could well be considered a necessary, if not a sufficient, condition for the effectiveness of an itinerant education program. It was further suggested that the concept of dialogue, informed by political and sociological considerations, could usefully be used to assist this interrogation of the perceptions of one group of itinerant teachers.

Details of itinerant teachers' working lives

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five itinerant teachers employed by the Brisbane School of Distance Education. Their working lives consisted of two distinct but closely related phases:

- working in Brisbane to set and assess students' completion of correspondence papers, and maintaining telephone contact with students, home tutors, and parents as required
- working in selected towns on the show circuit to teach 'face to face' lessons to students, and extending their personal contacts with home tutors and parents.

Sometimes the itinerant teachers were assisted in the local classrooms by 'teacher relief scheme' (TRS) or locally employed supply teachers, who would supervise the completion of activities rather than engage in active teaching, and who generally worked with the children in towns where the itinerant teachers did not spend time.

Each teacher generally worked with between fifteen and twenty children, usually in family groups across year levels. One teacher, responsible for six different year levels, commented:

> ...it's an awful lot of materials...to interact with. Especially with the new papers coming through, you've got to be familiar not with just one grade, [but] with every grade of the papers, which is very hard.

Her colleague agreed:

> ...our desks are piled up with papers like this to mark, and tonight I've got a box about this high, and I want to give it out, I want to get rid of it, so I'm just going to have to stay up all night until I can get it done.

The materials were predominantly print based, with few opportunities for the use of audio visual aids or computer assisted learning. Priority was given to "language across the curriculum", in which language activities were integrated into various subject areas. The papers covered the seven curriculum areas nominated by the Queensland Department of Education, by means of "topic webs". Learning tended to be individualised and self paced, although the intention was to cover the same content as would be addressed by teachers in 'mainstream' schools, and also to make activities more interactive than had previously been the case in distance education courses.

When they worked with the show children in local schools, the itinerant teachers tended to work intensively with them and to restrict interactions with local children. Reasons ranged from a lack of time to complete the required work, to a perception that local children might ridicule or fight the show children, to the view that the show children had little incentive to become friendly with children they were unlikely to see after the end of the week. The teachers felt that informal, rather than contrived, socialisation between the groups, could help to reduce some of the mutual misunderstanding. One teacher, who had been involved in the program for less than a year, observed:

> ...it works the other way, too. The show children think they're better than the other children. And...the...property children think they're better than children in towns, in schools. So I guess you always think what you are is the best.

A more positive view of the same phenomenon was taken by a teacher who had participated in the program for a longer period:

> ...it's definitely really strong. They are...really proud of who they are. They are a culture within a culture. They have their own set of behaviours. They have their own set of values. They move, live, work, talk, breathe Show.

Interestingly, she commented on school based attempts at contrived socialisation: "I wonder if 'socialisation' is really another word for learning the rules, for sort of learning who's boss. You know, this is the boss' school".

The five teachers came from a variety of backgrounds. The generally acknowledged 'mainstay' of the program attributed her success in helping to establish the innovation to the fact that she was not "a Queensland person": she had "come from somewhere else, and...was used to doing things that were a bit different". She worked as a teacher in the Northern Territory, then moved to Queensland and worked in support services before joining the Brisbane School of Distance Education.

The teacher who had been involved in the program for the second longest period of time (two years) trained as a primary teacher in Sydney, taught junior year levels in a Brisbane state primary school for nine years, then completed a graduate diploma in early childhood. "Ready for a change", she responded to an expression of interest distributed by the Brisbane School of Distance Education, whose administration assigned her to the Showmen's Guild program.

Another teacher, who specialised in the early childhood component of the program, had come to the Brisbane School of Distance Education with experience in writing distance education curriculum materials and as an early childhood consultant in another region of southeastern Queensland. She had worked in the program for two years.

The other female itinerant teacher had worked with the Brisbane School of Distance Education for one year, and participated in several programs (including visiting children in hospitals and on properties) as well as that for the show children. She had previously worked in another School of Distance Education in western Queensland, and before that had written distance education papers for the Queensland Open Access Centre.

The only male itinerant teacher working with the show children had joined the program earlier that year, replacing another male teacher who had returned to a 'mainstream' classroom. He

had a particular interest in "ongoing developments in technology within media development".

Knowledge of and empathy with show children's lifestyles

Various perceptions of the show children's lifestyles were expressed. One teacher summed up her view of the advantages and disadvantages of those lifestyles:

> Not educationally [disadvantaged], not work wise. I guess, the same with all distance children, I would say socially. I think they're disadvantaged. And I think physically distanced children are disadvantaged, as well. You can compare them to children in a mainstream school - sports wise, and fitness wise, coordination - they are much lower than a child in the State school system. But...that could be the only way I could find. I think material wise and content and resources, I think they have benefits over children in mainstream schools.

The teacher who had previously worked with children on properties identified a perceived difference from the show children:

> [On properties] They all aspire to go to boarding school. The sons of property owners all aspire to go back onto their property and actually regard themselves now as running that property. They actually talk about their sheep and their property and when they were mustering. So that's their aspiration. And it would seem the girls are more inclined that they will go to boarding school and then perhaps become governesses or teachers or nurses. There seems to be these fairly general categories they put themselves into, which you don't hear any of that with these [show] children. I don't know whether it's because it's understood that they will stay within the [Showmen's] Guild or they simply don't think that way.

The same teacher believed that both the show children and the itinerant teachers assigned to work with them were "specialist", and that the teachers had "probably made lots of adjustments and changes to the papers to suit those people's needs, perhaps more than teachers ha[d] done for the other children on our program".

By contrast, another teacher, who had been involved with the program for less than a year, felt that the show children began with an educational handicap deriving from their lifestyles:

> ...[the program] does give you a feel for the inequality of education that has existed for those kids, and with one central focus for them to get involved in an ongoing continuity of teacher work related activities, it's very good for them. I think it's still a very hard task for them, I think...it's a very hard job to teach country kids.

The teacher felt also that, however many subjects were included in the program, "it wouldn't have the full specialities of the normal classroom". This view was elaborated:

> Sometimes I'd love to be able to take...[the show children] home, and bring them into a school for an extended period of time, and really get them up to speed because there's a couple of little gaps, and you stumble across the gaps sometimes. And you've got to pick them up, and pinpoint certain skills and go for them, and get them up to speed on those things.

Evidently this comment reflected this teacher's view that remedying these perceived learning deficiencies was not easy to achieve in an environment characterised by disruptions and a lack of resources.

Despite her recognition that the show children were unquestionably not "a disadvantaged group of young Australians", one of the teachers who had worked in the program for over two years considered that they still "treasure that sort of stability" that her colleagues and she sought to establish in the itinerant classroom, regardless of its spatial location.

The ambivalence and ambiguities reflected in the preceding comments was epitomised in another teacher's musing:

> I suppose they're really advantaged in a way, as opposed to other distance children. They have continuous contact with their teachers, face to face, which our other children don't have as much of. They also have the experience of being in a school situation at fairly regular intervals, and they're also given access to social interactions with other children, other than their own social group. I think that in terms of other distance children, they don't always have as much access as the Showmen's children do. Then again, they haven't come from the environment where school has been as accessible as it is now, whereas our country children and some of our travellers have come from an environment where they know schools, they know what it's about, and they've mixed with other people. So you can sort of balance it out there. Their advantage, perhaps, is weighed by their disadvantage in the first place, if that makes sense.

Assessments of program efficacy - strengths

Some of the teachers who joined the program some time after its establishment were familiar with descriptions of the show children's education before that establishment. Asked about perceived improvements to the children's education, one teacher responded:

> Well, in terms of continuity, it must be wonderful for the children to have the one program following through. The children really dislike the idea of turning up at a school and being split up and put into the class for the week.

A relative newcomer to the program was certain of its effectiveness:

> I think it's a program that takes away that attitude that kids coming into school without a program,...and the teachers know they're there for a week and therefore not a lot is done with them. What you've got historically is kids going to places and being given last year's Christmas colour ins to do, while the rest of the class did something else. So it's good that that's been addressed. That's what the benefit of the whole program is. It really is a continuity and a monitoring of that continuity, so that a good education is made available to the kids.

Several teachers identified individuals on the show circuit whose enthusiasm and energy had made the program successful. This was held to communicate itself to other, less committed parents:

> They can see the benefit of the program for their kids and they're going to hang on to it and in some ways maintain the links and to keep supporting it to the full extent...It is a hard life and they do do work on the off days, setting up and travelling and what not. But they're very supportive of what we do, and they're not going to let things get in the way of seeing things spoilt.

The perceived importance of parental involvement was expressed in terms of a transference of responsibility:

> ...I think a lot of the success of any of this lies in the parents' understanding. We're probably harping on about that, but to get them to understand what is the way to go and how they can help their children, I think, is what we're looking at now, is getting them in and being with their kids. So that's the curriculum:

> once they understand it, they're the teachers.

The key role of the home tutor in assisting the show children's learning was reinforced by the itinerant teachers. They generally reported that the home tutors were conscientious and interested in developing their own skills, although "a couple" had failed to discharge their responsibilities to their children. A similar comment was made about the parents: "...without that support from the parent, then all the rest really don't come together". At the same time, it was acknowledged that home tutors and parents were not teachers, and that they relied heavily on successful course materials to be able to enact their role of being "*in loco pedagogis*".

One teacher considered that the program was particularly successful in building on the show children's inherently greater knowledge of mathematics, especially in relation to handling money on stalls and rides. Another teacher referred more generally to "a very good coverage for all the curriculum areas - and they were designed so that they would be in an integrated fashion". Some teachers felt that the program succeeded in redressing "that imbalance of what's okay on the showgrounds, and what's okay at school".

The teacher particularly interested in educational technology was pleased with the level of technological support in the program.

> ...we've got CD-ROMS, we've got a lot of technology that is available to interact with them and to write and their own interaction type games, educational type games, or drill games, those sorts of things which are great. And the kids love using the computer to do that.

However, this situation did not make the show children privileged in relation to 'mainstream' students. "To be honest, in schools...[some of the computer games are] pretty old hat now, it's been out for a fair while, but these kids had never seen it".

The same teacher appreciated perceived opportunities for his own professional development.

> Overall, the program material is very good. It covers all bases well. Very high quality in my book. And that's one thing about being involved in this program. It does give you a slant on how different people have done different things, and so it's good for me, it exposes me to different ideas on how to go about things. So when I get back to mainstream schools, I've got some new ideas to take with me.

Assessments of program efficacy - deficiencies

Several teachers identified particular disadvantages of the children's itinerant lifestyles that the program was unable to address fully. One such perceived problem was the lack of a routine.

> Being an early childhood type person, I mean having a Year One class,...you do the same thing every day at the same time. And the children learn from that. They say, "Hey, it's reading time now - we know what to do". There's a set of expectations that...you have as a classroom teacher, and that the children learn intrinsically. They just pick them up, you know. The Grade One class can do anything given that first term of routine training, and I think [with] these children, correspondence doesn't help that way, unless they're very organised and their home tutor is organised and does things in a similar way each day. But I think even being in another town each week also doesn't help their continuity.

The same teacher believed that lack of continuity also restricted the children's acquisition and development of skills, such as those involved in physical education. She commented that as yet they were unable to continue playing a sporting game once the supervising teacher left the field or court. She mentioned a possible solution to this difficulty:

> And while they've had such a long background of "That's the way they do it at home", and they're together so much playing, it's going to be hard for it to change. But we may change it from the bottom end up. As the little ones come through, we hope.

Another teacher explained this phenomenon rather differently:

> ...I'd say they're probably not as good sportsmen as children in schools. Children in the schools are used to taking knocks and not always winning and perhaps not always getting selected on the team. Whereas these children expect to be. They're not used to missing out on something, because they're used to that one to one always and virtually doing their own thing. So, to suddenly have someone who can run faster or better, they don't cope that well with it. But I guess that could be socialisation as well.

A related issue was the localised nature of the rules of certain games, which was suggested as an additional barrier to show children socialising with local children by means of playing sport

together. However, another teacher disagreed with this proposition:

> Well, once again, I don't think it would affect them. I mean, they would see different rules or perhaps different games, but because they don't mix with them, I don't know that it would make a lot of difference to them, because I think that they tend to play their own games and stay together anyway. And I don't think they'd be that aware. I don't think they take enough notice.

Another evident problem was a perceived excessive dependence on the individual support of the home tutor, so that the children "can be very lacking in independent type skills", and unable to function either when the supervisor withdrew from the learning situation or when asked to participate in group learning with other children. At least one teacher related this to her observation that the show children were not adept at "socialising with other [non show] people, other than themselves".

A further difficulty attended the employment of TRS teachers in local schools not visited by the itinerant teachers. Some of the home tutors and parents were perceived as expecting these local teachers to take over a large part of teaching, whereas their role was envisaged as one of providing support to the children and their tutors. As one itinerant teacher explained:

> A local person from that town...comes in - it keeps our costs down, because we're not travelling and not having to pay...travel allowance. But that teacher is then paid for the week on a supply teacher's salary...And that teacher is there supposedly to support the home tutors, particularly where home tutors may not be particularly literate, or are having trouble organising children's work or to model strategies of ways to get children to complete things. If there's a particular activity - maybe a writing activity - that is difficult, they can sit down and model it for the home tutor. They really are...envisaged as a support person. They weren't expected to teach all the children on their individual programs. And that's something we may have to reclarify with the parents and with the schools.

A mitigating circumstance, however, was the observation by at least one itinerant teacher that many of the local TRS teachers were the same people from year to year, so that they had a better understanding of the children's lifestyles than might otherwise be the case.

The potential role conflict cited in the previous paragraph was addressed by a number of the itinerant teachers. While recognising the vital intermediary role of home tutors, and while

acknowledging the need to accord a certain level of professional autonomy to the tutors, the teachers expressed some frustration that the division of the teaching role led to certain areas of the curriculum being neglected for some children. For example, one teacher regretted that, because the tutors "don't have time to go through a series of little exercises" in physical education, some students would have fewer opportunities than others for physical education. She explained:

> We can't even identify that they've cut things out. So they don't even have to tell us. So, if it's a home tutor who's not confident in their teaching ability or their ability to make a decision, they never let on. So they just simply don't do it.

This view was echoed by another teacher, who was disappointed that some home tutors did not accompany their charges to the local schools when the supply teachers worked with the children: "If they came with the home tutor, it would be much, much better". A different teacher also asserted the home tutor's crucial role in making the program successful.

> And it is reliant on home tutors, and home tutors being employed, home tutors or parents. The program will fall down if it's not supported by them to the full, because they can't expect kids to come into a school and just pick up and run with the things. They can't. It's just too hard.

A related problem concerned the fact that not all parents employed home tutors, who could devote all their energies to assisting the children to complete the correspondence papers. One teacher identified this as potentially a vicious circle, with students whose parents could not afford to employ home tutors failing to take advantage of the educational opportunities of attending the local schools.

> ...for the TRS person, it's very hard, because you've got to direct your time to those kids who sit there and become a distraction to the others, or they will not do anything unless they're directed to do something because often their reading skills aren't to the point where they can interpret the home tutor guides or instruction papers, so you need someone to help them, basically...we'll go and support a school and our days are flat out trying to run programs for the kids who haven't got home tutors.

Another perceived problem related to the format of some of the correspondence papers. One teacher commented that there were "too many books" in the materials sent to students in Years One, Two, and Three, and also that not all home tutors felt able or willing to complete the

detailed feedback information expected of them by the Brisbane School of Distance Education. Another teacher pointed to an excess of "teacher jargon" in "a lot of the home tutor guides"; "I think it's directed more towards the teacher's knowledge than a person who hasn't been involved in teacher education". Another teacher made a strong plea for "materials [to be] developed that are more user friendly and streamline...and perhaps...not related to the texts - [not] tied to texts". The briefest criticism of the material was that it was "so word based [that] you need a PhD to read it".

A perennial restriction on the effectiveness of innovative educational programs is insufficient funding. Various teachers identified areas of worthwhile expansion given more funding, including:

- having a specialist physical education itinerant teacher
- extending the services available to children with special needs
- using interactive videos and related technology to enhance communication between the itinerant teachers and the children and their home tutors.

Implications for other itinerant education projects

At least six important findings with implications for other itinerant education projects emerge from this paper.

Firstly, the comments of the itinerant teachers reported here suggest that matters of course development and design are closely intertwined with wider issues of perceived roles and lifestyles, both for themselves and for their clients. Among other things, this reinforces the researchers' view that course development and design in distance education needs to be 'targeted' and contextualised at a number of levels of complexity, and that courses developed and designed 'at a distance' from the interests and perceived needs of the intended recipients are unlikely to succeed.

Secondly, there is a very strong need for itinerant teachers to accept their role, and to be accepted in their role by their clients. This is not as straightforward as it might appear, because not only do the itinerant teachers represented here constitute a heterogeneous group, but there is evidence of a continuum of changing perceptions of that role, the longer that it is occupied by an individual staff member. Another potential complication is the apparent tensions in role

perceptions by itinerant teachers in relation to home tutors, whose own supposed uncertainties about the responsibilities of local TRS teachers have been reported in this discussion. Thus, while role acceptance might be desirable, it is by no means uncomplicated.

Thirdly, certain elements of 'educational folklore' (such as the importance of a routine of time and space) need to be reconceptualised in these changed circumstances. For example, constantly moving from one place to the next might be considered by a 'mainstream' teacher to be a disruption, whereas to an itinerant teacher it might well become an essential part of the flexibility that Robertson (1992) hailed as one of distance education's greatest assets. Another illustration of this changing understanding of pedagogical practice was the debate about the importance of the show children interacting with other children, and the different assumptions about what this interaction was intended to achieve, and whom it was designed to benefit.

Fourthly, the literature review posited the potential conceptual usefulness of applying the notion of dialogue - suitably politically and sociologically charged - to this study of an itinerant education program. At this stage, the picture is too confused to pass a summative judgment on the value of this exercise. Certainly there is evidence of genuine understanding among different participants in the program. This is despite the continuing restrictions on communication (such as having show day as a public holiday one day a week), which for other groups would prove to be insuperable difficulties. Perhaps as the program continues the conflicting role expectations of itinerant teachers, home tutors, parents, and local TRS teachers will be resolved. At present these diverse expectations appear to offer a considerable impediment to meaningful dialogue in all situations except individual cases.

Fifthly, one issue raised independently by a number of the itinerant teachers reported in this paper is the common perception of teaching itinerant students as a kind of ghetto in the teaching profession. While all of them identified elements of the experience as enjoyable and rewarding, most of them stated that they would leave their current positions within a few years and return to 'mainstream' teaching. This suggests an unspoken likening of teaching itinerant students to helping refugees in working for organisations such as Community Aid Abroad: the experience was character building, it was directed at helping a disadvantaged minority, and it was not feasible to stay in it for too long.

Sixthly, an associated common belief seemed to be a muted but continuing insistence on the 'otherness' of the show children and their families. While reference was made to the 'special

needs' of these itinerant students, this tended to be intertwined with an assumption that these needs marked the students as inherently different, and that they could not be accommodated in a 'normal' or 'mainstream' classroom. Similarly, the researchers identified a 'fine line' that the teachers held to exist between helping the show children to learn and becoming an advocate for the wider educational agenda of the show people (whereby the educational role could slide into a welfare role). In an organisation established to serve the potentially competing interests of several diverse groups of 'distance students', this was considered by organisational personnel to be politically naive, if not dangerous.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the role of the itinerant teacher requires substantial adjustment in attitude as much as in practice. The findings of this paper suggest that such adjustment is by no means unproblematic. As awareness of and empathy with the particular group of students grow, the uncertainties might be said to increase rather than reduce in number. At a relatively straightforward level, the debate about socialisation of the show children reflected conflicting ideas about the children's lifestyles and the meanings and values attached to those lifestyles. At another but no less important level, the teachers were talking about their own incorporation into a world that in most cases fascinated them but that for all of them remained in the realm of 'the other'. Whether that dividing line will ever be crossed by an individual teacher remains to be seen.

Finally, greater space has been devoted in this paper to representing the itinerant teachers' perceptions of the deficiencies of the program than to discussing their observations of its strengths. This certainly does not suggest that the program is considered a failure; several show children, their parents, their home tutors, and (importantly for the argument presented here) their itinerant teachers would vehemently reject such a proposition. It does reflect those teachers' uncertainties - about specific aspects of the program, certainly, but also about their own responses to the program and to what it means for their understandings of what it is to be an educator. If we as educational researchers admit to similar feelings, at least we know that we will be in good company.

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